



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**THE PORTRAYAL OF MAIN FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THREE
NOVELS OF TONI MORISSON USING THE POSTCOLONIAL
FEMINISM THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

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**Bachelor of Education with Honours
(Teaching English as Second Language)
2009**

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Statement of Originality

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**“The Portrayal of Main Female Characters in Three Novels of Toni Morrison using the
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This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
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The project entitled ‘The Portrayal of Main Female Characters in Three Novels of Toni Morisson using the Postcolonial Feminism Theoretical Framework’ was prepared by Nora binti Sahari and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Education with Honours (Teaching of English as a Second Language).

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ABSTRACT

The Portrayal of Main Female Characters in Three Novels of Toni Morisson using the Postcolonial Feminism Theoretical Framework

Nora binti Sahari

This study aims to investigate the representation of African American women main characters in novels by Toni Morisson, in which the foci are on whether or not discrimination and oppression towards the African American women characters are evident. The texts used are; (i) *The Bluest Eye* (ii) *Sula*, and (iii) *Beloved*, which are all written by Toni Morisson, an African American author in which the novels reflect and embody the lives of African American women during the postcolonial period. The Postcolonial Feminism theory is applied in doing a literary analysis of the portrayal of the African American women characters. In addition to that, the issues brought up in the novels are viewed from the two factors that condition the form of oppressions toward the main characters which are the society and the colonizer. From the findings, the African American women are overly being portrayed by their physical characteristics which affect their psychological characteristics negatively. Their roles are also determined by the colonizer and the society. The findings of this study bridge the existing knowledge gap noted from related previous studies.

ABSTRAK

Gambaran Watak Wanita Afrika-Amerika di dalam Tiga Novel hasil karya Toni Morisson Menggunakan Pendekatan Poskolonialisasi Feminisma.

Nora binti Sahari

*Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat representasi watak-watak wanita utama Afrika-Amerika di dalam novel-novel hasil karya Toni Morisson. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyiasat sama ada wujudnya diskriminasi dan penindasan terhadap watak-watak wanita utama di dalam novel-novel tersebut. Novel-novel yang digunakan ialah (i) *The Bluest Eye* (ii) *Sula*, dan (iii) *Beloved*, hasil tulisan penulis wanita Afrika-Amerika, Toni Morisson. Novel-novel tersebut memperihalkan watak-watak utama wanita Afrika-Amerika dan gambaran kehidupan mereka selepas dijajah. Teori Poskolonial Feminisme diaplikasikan dalam menganalisa teks untuk tujuan kajian ini. Isu- isu yang terdapat di dalam novel-novel tersebut dilihat melalui dua faktor utama yang menyumbang kepada penindasan iaitu dari sudut penjajah dan juga masyarakat. Hasil kajian mendapati wanita-wanita Afrika-Amerika digambarkan melalui ciri-ciri fizikal yang telah memberi pengaruh negatif secara psikologi kepada mereka. Peranan mereka yang dipengaruhi oleh tanggapan masyarakat dan penjajah turut digambarkan di dalam novel-novel yang dipilih. Hasil kajian ini mampu mengurangkan jurang pengetahuan yang didapati wujud daripada kajian-kajian sebelum ini.*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter is the brief overview on the proposed study. First and foremost, the topic of the study and the background of the study are introduced. Then, the aims and objectives of the study are stated to provide a clear indication on the types of data that will be collected in this study. The significance of the study in concordance to the portrayal of female characters in novels written by African-American writer during postcolonial era is explain next to examine the reasons why this study is conducted. The concepts that are defined in this study will be explained through the explicit

definition of terms. Lastly, the scopes of the study which are the boundaries of what the study covers and does not cover are described.

1.1 Background of the Study

Colonialism has affected almost three quarters of the people living in the world today. Colonialism involves settlement, governing indigenous people, exploiting and developing the resources of the land, and embedding imperial government. These countries, namely South Africa, Fiji, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore and few others are the countries that has been colonized for a long period and eventually gained their independence. Their lives have been shaped by the colonizer, not only in the political and economical spheres but also in arts, where literature has become the soul of expressing their new perceptions. Writing, as a form of sharing the realities experienced by colonized peoples had been the most powerful medium in influencing others to understand the issues and hardships that the people had been through during the colonialism.

The term ‘postcolonial’ is used to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. Therefore, the literatures of these colonized countries that emerged after the colonization are all postcolonial literatures (Ashcroft et.al. 2). As a literary theory, postcolonial literature deals with literature produced in countries that one were colonized by other countries, especially of the European colonial powers such as Britain, France and Spain. Postcolonial literature also deals with literature written in colonies countries and by their citizens that has colonized people as its subject matter. Colonized people, especially of the British Empire, attended British universities where their access to education is still unavailable in the colonies. However, they still created a new criticism where it is mostly literary, and especially in novels.

Each of these literatures has something in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics which is they emerged in their present form out of

the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre (Ashcroft et al. 3). Colonialism has operated very differently in different countries, and the spread of colonialism was vast and varied in the relations it inspired, where the main intention of the colonizer is 'the conquest and control of others' land and goods' (Loomba 2 as cited in Wisker 10). Hence, the issues face by the people of the colonized countries might be different due to the very different geographical, historical, social, religious, economic and so forth.

In postcolonial literatures, the major issue is concerned with place and displacement. It is here that the special postcolonial crisis identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place (Ashcroft et.al. 4). Due to this, the main reason for the postcolonial writer to produce works, especially in the forms of written discourse is because they hope that it could help the establishment of identity after gaining their independence without being in the shadows of the colonizers or past history of being colonized.

This study focuses on literature that portrays the issues in postcolonial, focusing on African-American women's writing that are depicted in the novels selected. As Audre Lorde puts it, writing enables women to speak out, step out and value their lives (Lorde 101 as cited in Wisker 38). This is concerned with the twentieth-century postcolonial where critical perspectives are developed from African-American writing and with feminist critical practice, where the selected writer for this study is a postcolonial writer from British postcolonial contexts. The work considered here is not merely the economic, political and psychoanalytic constrictions and influences on gendered experience, but also themes and concerns which arise out of these experiences; motherhood, an interest in the mother tongue; identity and subjectivity as a women, Black or White; relationships; families; sexual politics are the main issues portray in their work (Wisker 4).

Postcolonial and African-American women's writing deals with cohesive discussion of key gendered issues, specifically motherhood, language, mother tongue, relationships, cultural and gendered identity and different modes of expression. The selected women writers, White, Black, indigenous, settler or migrant (choice or by choice), speak from a variety of cultural contexts (Wisker 4). These issues reflect how the African-American women perceived themselves after they are being colonized for a long period. As stated by Boehmer (254), until the 1970s, the writing of women represented something of a lost continent in both colonial and postcolonial nationalist discourses. Thus, women were not absent from colonialist activity, where they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and, in some cases, religion and caste. Literature again was a powerful medium through where their self-definition was sought.

Feminism is a discourse that involves movements, theories, and philosophies which are concerned with the issue of gender difference, advocate quality for women, and campaign for women's rights and interests. As there are a lot of theories on feminism emerged, the theory on postcolonial feminism and Black feminism fits for this study. Postcolonial feminism argues that the oppression relating to the colonial experience, particularly racial, class, and ethnic oppression, has marginalized women in postcolonial societies. They challenge the assumption that gender oppression is the primary force of patriarchy. Postcolonial feminists object to portrayals of women of non-Western societies as passive and voiceless victims and the portrayal of Western women as modern, educated and empowered.

Meanwhile, Black feminism criticism argues that both criticism and fiction are narratives which represent race in particular ways (Humm 172). It also argues that sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably bound together. Forms of feminism that strive to overcome sexism and class oppression but ignore race can discriminate against many people, including women, through racial bias. The Combahee River Collective argued in 1974 that the liberation of Black women entails

freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. One of the theories that evolved out of this movement was Alice Walker's Womanism.

Alice Walker and other Womanists pointed out that Black woman experienced a different more intense kind of oppression from that of White women. They point to the emergence Black feminism after earlier movements led by White middle-class women who they regard as having largely ignored oppression based on race and class. Patricia Hill-Collins defined Black feminism, in *Black Feminist Thought* (1991), as including women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary Black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society.

Black feminists contend that the liberation of Black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. There is a long-standing and important alliance between postcolonial feminists, which overlaps with transnational feminism and third-world feminism, and Black feminists. Both have struggled for recognition, not only from men in their own culture, but also from Western feminists.

Thus, by conducting this study, it is hope that the researcher is able to portray the forms of oppressions and issues face by the main characters during the postcolonial period in the novels selected.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The emergence of female's writing proved that women are not afraid to speak up their stands and arguments about their position in the society and how they want the society to perceive them. The literary works and fictions that are available has become the means for them to convey their experiences and their thoughts, as well as the representative of other women voices. Their literary works and fictions which

portrayed the treatment of women by the society are written with the intention to improve the perception of the society upon them.

Being a woman, they are bound to be the victim in any form of discriminations by their social circle. They are often being the subjects of racism, sexuality and so forth, where they experienced 'double colonization' by both their male counterparts and the dominant colonial powers. Hence, women writers speak out not only against the triple burden of race, class and gender, but against a history of colonialism which has silenced and subordinated them (Wisker 32). The study on the portrayal of women in the literary works and fictions from the postcolonial contexts enables the appreciation concerns with the related issues (motherhood, mother tongue, identity, gendered and sexual relationships, family etc.) and has widened up the view of the people towards women around the globe.

Hence, this leads to the statement of the problem in this study in which the focus is on the oppression and issues face by main female characters as portrayed in postcolonial novels selected. By studying the works of Toni Morisson, the researcher hopes to better understand the issues faced by African-American women during postcolonial period and how they deal with those issues which totally affected their identity specifically and also their life as a whole.

1.3 Purposes of the Study

This study attempts to find out the portrayal of women in the novels by Toni Morisson. There are three main objectives that would be the main focus of the study. The objectives are:

- (i) To illustrate how the protagonist are portrayed physically and psychologically in the three novels chosen.
- (ii) Their roles assigned by the society and the colonizer.

- (iii) To investigate the forms of oppression and issues that exists related to the protagonists which are significant during the postcolonial era.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is it enables the researcher to interpret the messages that the novels are trying to convey to the people around the world. It is also hoped that through the understanding of the female characters portrayed in the novels, the readers would appreciate the literary works and fictions of postcolonial writers since they have given their efforts in writing the issues and oppressions of women in postcolonial period. Besides that, this study also looking forward to change the typical thoughts of people towards women, especially on the issue of gender equality. Their needs and thoughts should be attended to because each individual in the world has his or her own right as human being.

Apart from that, the results of this study will determine whether the developments of the characters are affected by the issues presented in the novel. Besides, it will show how the characters are described based on postcolonial feminist theory. This study also contributes in shaping the way the researcher and the readers in viewing or analyzing this type of fiction. This study will also be a useful reference for further researchers who are interested in the works of other feminist writers. Those who are interested in this issue will be able to gain a better insight and further appreciate the struggles of women to survive in the society where they are look upon as the second class people.

1.5 Operational Definitions of Terms

1.5.1 Definition of Female Portrayal

In literature, a character is a verbal representation of human being. They are presented by the authors through the depictions of actions,

conversations, descriptions, reactions, inner thoughts and reflections, and also through the author's own interpretive commentary (Roberts 66). The descriptions of the characters are the best clue to understand what they are. It may signal qualities such as naiveté, weakness, deceit, a scheming personality, inner conflict, sudden realization, or other growth or change (Roberts 68).

As for this study, the female characters are depicted in terms of their physical appearance, psychological characteristics, gender roles and the gender stereotypes imposed upon them. Basically, these criteria would base on the disclosure of the female characters by the author herself. Consequently, these inaccurate portrayals of women, it leads to women's unfair discrimination and oppression.

1.5.1.1 Definition of Physical Characteristics

Generally, the definition of physical characteristics refers to the external appearance of the character. It includes the character's name, date of birth or age, address, race or ethnic background or nationality, height, weight and body build, hair, eyes, peculiar physical traits, health, smell, voice, mannerisms, type of clothes, shoes, accessories she wears, eating habits and other forms of physical traits which is based on Part 1 (Physical) in Tritt's article, 'Character Trait Chart and Personality Components'. As for this study, the physical attributes of the female characters are analyzed based on this chart as the guidelines and will be inferred in the context which it appears in the novels.

1.5.1.2 Definition of Psychological Characteristics

According to Harman (7), personality psychology studies the ways ordinary people think about personality and character traits, which is to be distinguished from studying the truth about personality and character traits. As for this study, this characteristic refers to the words used to describe the personality components of the female characters in the selected novels. It will be described in terms of emotional and psychological characteristics that the characters may possessed. Based on ‘Personality Components’ outlined in Tritt’s article, these are some of the adjectives used to describe the female characters: arrogant, hateful, rebellious, carefree, simple and so forth. The lists of these psychological characteristics will be used to interpret the characters in the novels selected based on the context that happened in the novels.

1.5.1.3 Definition of Gender Roles

According to the article ‘Elimination of Gender Stereotypes: Mission (Im)Possible?’(5), gender roles are shaped and imposed through a variety of social influences. It is formed during the socialization phases of childhood and adolescence. It is a set of perceived behavioral norms associated particularly with males or females, in a given social group or system. Gender roles influence people throughout their lives. In our society today, men and women perform distinctly different roles which are based on nothing more than their biological gender. Although these roles do not hold true for each individual, the majority of people live out their lives in accordance with these extremely pervasive roles. In this study, the roles of the female characters in the novels were investigated. Their roles will determine their value in the society they lived in.

1.5.1.4 Definition of Gender Discrimination and Oppression

As emphasized by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986 as cited in Schmitt et.al 1), discrimination is an intergroup phenomenon that results from an internalization of group membership and serves to privilege certain social groups while disadvantaging others. In that sense, experiences with discrimination are not limited to specific situations in which members of a disadvantaged group encounter a prejudiced personality, but can occur in nearly any situation in which a member of a disadvantaged group interacts with a member of a more privileged group. Discrimination can be in any forms but the most subtle forms are race, age and gender discrimination. These forms of discriminations is often occurs to women, as depicted in the novels selected.

Gender oppression can be defined as the individual acts of abuse and violence, patterns of power and control, and systems of abuse and violence perpetrated against women and girls due to their gender. This includes state-sponsored violence; the effects of imperialism and capitalism on our material, social, and spiritual conditions; corporate violence; media violence; workplace violence; and violence at the level of family and intimate relations (Report from INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 8). In terms of colonial period, colonial oppression may result in glorification of pre-colonial culture, which, in cultures with traditions of stratification of power along lines of gender, could mean the acceptance of, or refusal to deal with, inherent issues of gender inequality.

For the purpose of this study, it is to find out whether discrimination and oppression exists towards the female characters in the chosen novel.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is that the researcher may analyze the novels through the theory of postcolonial feminist theory solely although there are other theories that can be applied. The researcher feels that the selected theory best describes the characters and the issues in the novels since the novels are written during the postcolonial era. Besides, the novels that the researcher has selected are written by the African – American writer, therefore the researcher do not share the same context of situation with the protagonist and the writer. Thus, the researcher may not be able to fully understand and identify the words, actions and situations portrayed in the novels.

1.7 Chapter Review

This chapter deals with the background of the study regarding postcolonial countries, the feminists' issues and its relation to literary works. It also describes the aims of the study which is to be carried out as proposed in this paper. This study is hoped to bring further insights on works by an African-American Female authors. Definition of the operational terms is also included to provide relevant knowledge of the concept centralised in this paper. Related operational terms touched upon in this chapter is the term postcolonial and feminism in accordance to literature. Issues illustrated in the selected novels will be looked into based on the postcolonial feminism approach which will be further discussed in-depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW